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EPA tests Simi's ground water

Samples drawn to see if perchlorate persists

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A federal water expert sampled Simi Valley ground water Thursday to confirm the existence of perchlorate, a chemical associated with rocket fuel found in earlier tests.

The Environmental Protection Agency is studying Simi Valley ground water for perchlorate after a local water agency found trace elements of the chemical in west-end well and surface water.

Katherine Baylor, an EPA hydrogeologist, flew down from San Francisco Thursday and took two water samples from an artesian flow on Casarin Avenue for testing in a Richmond lab. Test results are expected within 30 days.

Perchlorate is used to make solid rocket fuel, munitions and fireworks and is thought to interfere with human thyroid functions. When it leaches into ground water, it is difficult to treat, officials say.

This spring, the Calleguas Municipal Water District conducted tests on Casarin Avenue and detected perchlorate at 4.7 parts per billion, less than one-third the recommended state standard for drinking water.

"We're here basically to confirm that perchlorate is here," Baylor said, before stooping into an algae-filled gutter to fill four bottles with brackish water. "The amount they found is really really small, almost below the instrument detection level. Actually, five parts per billion amounts to five drops in a swimming pool."

Because the Casarin site is four miles from the edge of Rocketdyne's Santa Susana Field Laboratory, where perchlorate has been discovered in 12 wells, EPA officials question whether the chemical originated there.

Though the chemical has numerous industrial uses, it has also been reported to come from chemical fertilizer, according to an EPA bulletin.

"At first we thought there was a natural tie-in with Rocketdyne, but now we don't," said Tom Kelly, EPA project manager for cleanup of the sprawling lab in the hills southeast of Simi Valley. "We are potentially concerned if it turns out to be true."

City officials, who alerted the EPA after learning of the Calleguas test results, said the chemical does not pose a health risk because the water is not used for drinking.

Calleguas officials once considered high Simi Valley ground water as a potential drinking water source but now say it is too polluted with salts and chemicals such as perchlorate, uranium and radon.

Rocketdyne officials maintain perchlorate, not used at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory since the 1960s, has been shown through well monitoring not to affect local water supplies.

The state Department of Toxic Substances Control, which monitors chemical waste cleanup at the lab, is interested in the EPA perchlorate test results.

"At this time, we are going to be interested in that analysis; not only the source, but where the perchlorate is coming from," said Ron Baker, spokesman for the DTSC. "If the sample the EPA takes is lower than the previous sample, it will be good news."



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